



Routledge Studies in Islamic Philosophy

AL-GHAZALI AND THE DIVINE

Massimo Campanini



Al-Ghazālī and the Divine

This book examines the philosophy of al-Ghazālī, analysing his conception of God within Islamic theology. Seeking to contribute to the greater understanding of Muslim thought, it analyses his ‘orthodox’ theory, based on the notion that the spiritual struggle (*jihād*) and philosophical enquiry are informed by the possession of firm science (*‘ilm*).

Exploring a wide range of Arab texts and Arab primary literature, this book therefore examines a crucial period of Medieval Islamic history, while emphasizing the multifarious and by no means monolithic components of the Muslim outlook. In seeking to understand Islamic religion as a creative and progressive heritage, it also demonstrates the moderate and balanced character of mainstream Islam, and ultimately argues that al-Ghazālī’s thought is the best expression of Islamic intellectuality and spirituality.

Taking a theoretical approach, this book will be useful to students and scholars of Islamic philosophy, theology and history.

Massimo Campanini is Professor of Islamic Studies, having taught at the universities of Urbino, Naples and Trento. His recent publications include *The Qur’an: Modern Muslim Interpretations* (Routledge, 2011) and *Philosophical Perspectives on Modern Qur’anic Exegesis* (Equinox Publishing, 2016).

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Massimo Campanini
Milan, February 2018

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Introduction

Al-Ghazālī and the Qur’ān: preliminary remarks

Why al-Ghazālī and the Qur’ān

When I began to study Islam in 1980, I came across almost by chance two passages which stimulated my interest. The first was the following by al-Ghazālī:

As to the issues which [theology] deals with, all of them are concerned with theoretical reflection on God Most High. For if we reflect on the world, we do not reflect on it insofar as it is world, body, Heaven and Earth, but insofar as it is the work of God. And if we reflect on the Prophet – bless God and save him! – we do not reflect on him insofar as he is a man, honourable, knowledgeable and righteous, but insofar as he is the Messenger of God. ... There is no speculation but about God.

(1972: 10, 2013: 5–6; translation slightly modified)

Al-Ghazālī achieved this awareness throughout his life as he developed his understanding of the religious sciences: ‘We have looked for the knowledge of what is different from God’, he once inveighed against himself and against his brother Ahmad, ‘but [knowledge] refused [to deal] with any other but God (*talabnā al-‘ilm li-ghayr Allāh fa abā an yakūna illā li’llāh*)’ (quoted in Moosa 2005: 90).

In the *Jawāhir al-Qur’ān* (*Jewels of the Qur’ān*) we also read: ‘The highest and noblest knowledge is that of God Most High and all the other sciences are pursued on Its behalf and because of It¹ (al-Ghazālī 2015: 117, ch. 4).

Obviously, this idea permeates all Muslim thought. In the Mu’tazilite tradition there was the theme ‘every instant passed without the knowledge of God is wasted’ (quoted in van Ess 2002: 152). *Tawhīd*, God’s unity and oneness, is the very pillar of Islam.

The second passage I hinted at above is chapter (*sūra*) 112 of the Qur’ān, the *sūrat al-Ikhlās*:

Say: It *Allāh* [is] One, *Allāh* the unfathomable.² It did not beget nor was It begotten and nothing is equal to It (*Qul huwa Allāh ahad Allāh al-samad lam yalid wa lam yūlad wa lam yakun lahu kufu’an ahad*).³

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Impressed by these passages, my aim became to focus on the idea of God and to think of It in Its absolute transcendence. More precisely, I focused on the concept of monotheism, the doctrine or belief that there is only one God, in its broadest sense. The passion for divine unity is the kernel of the Islamic theological, philosophical and anthropological outlook. Islamic monotheism is absolutely beyond any compromise on this topic⁴ and stands opposed to any form of incarnation and Trinitarianism.

It is worth noting that in Islamic culture ‘theology’ is completely different from the Western variety, as I will argue at length in the following chapters. Derived from the Greek, *theo-logia* means the ‘study of God’, and involves the possibility of knowing God’s essence. Describing God as a Trinity, Christianity claims to be able to fathom the inner essence of God. There is no equivalence in Islam: God is actually *ineffable*, that is (again from the Greek) it is something we cannot speak of. Al-Ghazālī said on many occasions that we know only the acts of God (creation, judgement, mercy, bounty, sustenance, peace, etc.), not Its essence. The Beautiful Names (an issue I will deal with extensively in Chapter 3) allow a glimpse into the unknown, but the secret reality of God remains veiled.

Therefore, what does it mean to think of God from an Islamic – specifically a Ghazalian – point of view? I will argue in this book that the Islamic idea of God is akin to Kant’s regulative idea of reason, and the best formulation in Islamic terms that I found in my studies is the following by Fazlur Rahman (1989: 4):

God is the dimension which makes other dimensions possible; He gives meaning and life to everything. He is all-enveloping, literally infinite, and He *alone* is infinite. All else carries in the very texture of its being the hallmark of its finitude and creatureliness: ‘Everything thereon [literally “on the Earth”, but meaning the whole gamut of nature] is vanishing, there remaining only the Face of Your Lord, the Possessor of Majesty and Generosity’.

(Q. 55: 26–27; emphasis in the original)

In Chapter 3 I provide an in-depth discussion of the metaphysical issue of God’s face (*wajh*). My account takes a different approach to that of the Islamic scholar Ibn ‘Arabī, for example, and rejects any monistic interpretation of this attribute. I will suggest that al-Ghazālī offered a balanced possible solution to the problem.

In Western thought divine transcendence and human knowledge are bridged by theology, while in Islam there is no theology in this sense. It is a commonplace to say that Islam is not orthodoxy but orthopraxy, but perhaps we can go a step further when speaking of *theopraxis* (the practice of focusing mainly on God’s actions). As we cannot fathom the essence of God but can only study Its acts, so we acknowledge that God is action, continual activity, and the Qur’ān is a guide for human praxis. As we shall see, al-Ghazālī argued for the unity of science and action. Jurisprudence is the foremost

(albeit not always the best⁵) outcome of *theopraxis*. Al-Ghazālī was also a skilled jurist and his juridical contributions were sometimes very original.

Islam is essentially theocentric but humanity and society occupy a central place in the Islamic *Weltanschauung* (world view). Christianity is also a humanistic ideology. Both religions extoll man as the best creature in the universe. Concerning this point, my view diverges. I reject anthropocentrism. I do not believe that humanity is the goal of creation and life's evolution. God did not create the universe for humans. Humans are only an experiment of God, only one of the innumerable creative experiments It made in the infinite universe in never-ending time. As Giordano Bruno put it:

No ends, boundaries and walls exist which can limit and belittle the infinite quantity of things. ... For from the infinite, new quantity of matter always comes into being. Consequently, Democritus and Epicurus, saying that reality renews itself and reproduces itself continuously in the infinite [time and space], grasped [the truth] better than he who tries to keep constant the steadfastness of things along all eternity.⁶

Bruno was a materialist at heart, but he believed in 'God': a God viewed as the eternal and infinite substance of universe and nature whose activity is never *ociosa* (idle). Today, physicists and astronomers search anxiously for 'other' – human or animal – life in the 'infinite' universe, for millions of habitable planets exist in millions of galaxies. Doubtless God experimented with other forms of life elsewhere because, as the Qur'ān says, 'It started creation and then makes it anew again' (*innahu yabda'u al-khalq thumma yu'īduhu*) (Q. 10: 4).

I believe that on our Earth this experiment reached its end with humanity, endowed by God with free will, and which demonstrated itself refractory in the pursuit of righteousness and justice. Sadly, however, humans remained violent and abusive, notwithstanding the law. The problem is not violence in itself, though; the problem is justice. If we implement justice, violence will be abolished or at least quelled and brought under control. The Qur'ān says: 'Do not transgress the balance. Measure the right weight and do not fall short in the balance' (*a-lā tatghaū fī'l-mīzān wa aqīmū al-wazn bi'l-qist wa lā tukhsirū al-mīzān*) (Q. 55: 7–8).

But this did not happen in human history. God abandoned mankind to its destiny. Humanity will perish at a time we are not able to calculate because of wars, pollution, desertification, hunger, overpopulation, unnatural behaviour, dissolution of the self. This is the very meaning of the 'silence of God' theorized by many theologians of all religions. This is the very meaning of the closure of prophecy.⁷

This highly pessimistic view does not prevent anyone from carrying out their duty, as al-Ghazālī pointed out, and he urged people to cultivate the 'science' of God. For good reasons, Muslim thinkers often recall a *ḥadīth*⁸ which represents the cornerstone of this inquisitive tension: 'I [God] was a

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hidden treasure and I wished to be known'. And again from the Qur'ān: 'We shall show our signs in the horizons and in themselves so that it becomes clear to them that It is the real Truth' (*sanurihim āyātina fī'l-afāq wa fī anfusihim hattā yatabayyana lahum annahu al-haqq*) (Q. 41: 53).

In this framework of crisis, it is useful to return to grand narratives and ideologies. 'Weak thought',⁹ like Friedrich Nietzsche's 'death of God', had the merit of emphasizing the importance of hermeneutics and interpretation over 'strong' metaphysics,¹⁰ but ideology is not simply 'false consciousness' as traditional, conservative Marxism holds, but also, indeed above all, the construction of meaning, politics and society.¹¹ It is compulsory to harden the 'liquid' world we are living in. We need to go beyond Westernization which is imbued with technological nihilism¹² and, in its Christian version, obsessed by sin and expiation, and beyond ideologies like Buddhism and Hinduism which are mainly grounded on 'void' and 'nothingness', and thus support the nullification of human being and human self-identity.

In this book I will study al-Ghazālī's thought starting from these premises. From my perspective, thinking about Islam and the divine with al-Ghazālī involves at least five points:

- 1 Al-Ghazālī was convinced that 'true' Islamic doctrine was the 'middle way' (*wasat*) between extremisms. For him, the most obviously extreme thinkers of his time were the Isma'ili-Bātinis who extolled the *imāms* over the Prophet Muhammad, the unique true *imām*. Extremists were the 'theopathic' *sūfī*, like al-Hallāj, who claimed to be able to bridge the ontological distance between the Supreme God and the contingent creatures. Extremists were the philosophers who claimed to be able to explain everything about God, the universe, mankind and society, thus exaggerating the apodeictic demonstrative power of pure reason. Extremists were the jurists and the '*ulamā*' who lost themselves in the minutiae of legal casuistry. According to al-Ghazālī, however, Islam is a middle way insofar as it follows the footsteps of the Prophet; it seeks to approach God, but retains the necessary ontological and essential difference between It and Its creatures. Islam appreciates logic and demonstrative arguments but emphasizes the liberty of God, an acting and willing *person*, free to change the rules of nature if It wants; Islam believes that *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) is necessary in order to rule society but does not sacrifice the soul's perfection to pedantic prescriptions that are useless for attaining a future life and happiness.
- 2 Therefore, a central idea in al-Ghazālī's thought is the 'balance' (*mīzān*) between science and action: science without action has no scope; action without science is blind.
- 3 Al-Ghazālī viewed God as dynamism and freedom. God is really omnipotent, i.e. *absolutus*, or free, from any restraint, obligation or duty. All the possibilities were open in front of It when It created the world, and God freely chose the kind of world It wanted. Eric Ormsby (1983)

correctly pointed out that for al-Ghazālī our world can be considered the best possible, but, I stress, only from a human point of view, not from a divine point of view. The choice of God was the best in relation to Its intentions at that particular moment, not universally. God's dynamism is aptly expressed by the attribute of *al-khallāq* (Q. 36: 82), 'One who continuously creates'.

- 4 Partially in contradiction with what I have said, I believe that philosophy played an important role in al-Ghazālī's yearning for God, because, albeit perhaps against his intentions, he turned philosophy into the propaedeutical key with which to unlock the kernel of the Qur'ān. He was a philosopher in the sense of St Augustine, though, rather than in the sense of Descartes (or Averroes). His philosophy was *hikma* not *falsafa*,¹³ because it always remained connected with religion and philosophy cannot do without religion.
- 5 Last but not least, thinking about Islam and the divine with al-Ghazālī does mean to offer a moderate solution to the metaphysical problem of God, because al-Ghazālī deals with God as 'the' Being and not as an entity (*ens*) among others. In other words, his metaphysics is not grounded on entity (*to òn*) but on *Sein* (*eīnai*), thus avoiding the nihilistic involution implied in the triumph of technology.

Following this path to the end involves a final confrontation with Christianity, particularly with the incarnation and Trinity doctrines. As Giordano Bruno, who confessed to the Inquisitors that he was never persuaded by the Trinity, I agree that, theoretically, incarnation and Trinity doctrines stimulated the elaboration of ideas, but their foundation is very far from the purity and simplicity of Being. Moreover, they produced a theoretical casuistry so intricate that the apodeictic demonstration of their assumptions became actually impossible. I will return to these issues in the final section of this book, and in particular will try to explain why al-Ghazālī's concept of religion (Islam) cannot be Trinitarian.

Thinking about Islam and the divine with al-Ghazālī involves thinking about the Qur'ān, because on the whole al-Ghazālī's work has been a diuturnal and never-ending commentary on the Qur'ān. As a jurist, theologian, philosopher and mystic (or at least a 'spiritual' character) al-Ghazālī found diuturnally in the Qur'ān the overall basis of Islamic thought – the source of his inspiration. As he said in the *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, the Holy Book is an ocean without limits (*bahr muhīt*) and the believer can draw from it everything that he/she needs in terms of the inspiring principles of science and action. Al-Ghazālī devoted his research to understanding the Holy Book from different and multifarious points of view, trying to show its plurality of meanings and possible utilizations.

Of course, al-Ghazālī made extensive use of Prophet Muhammad's *hadīth* traditions (the *sunna*) too, but we must acknowledge that he was not a good *muhaddith* (i.e. a transmitter of prophetic traditions). Often he quotes

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unknown *hadīths* that are impossible to find in canonical collections; he shows no apparent critical attitude towards the authenticity of the *isnāds*, accepting as trustworthy every *hadīth* he uses, however weak. As a Shāfi'ite scholar this is in a sense understandable, but his carelessness with regard to the authenticity of the *isnāds* is a surprising feature for such a celebrated professor of *sharī'a* and *fiqh*.

On the other hand, the relationship between the Qur'ān and the *sunna* is a sensitive epistemological issue. The *hadīths* constitute a corpus that is strictly intertwined with the Qur'ān. Together, the Holy Book and the Prophet's *sunna* co-mingle to form a unique texture, supporting each other. For centuries, Muslim theologians and jurists debated whether the Qur'ān abrogates the *sunna* or vice versa. Nasr Abū Zayd (1999) denounced the dangers implicit in overemphasizing the importance of *sunna* over the Qur'ān, as al-Shāfi'ī did (and al-Ghazālī was a Shāfi'ite, albeit one who was not particularly inclined towards this theoretical orientation). Actually, the straightforward word of God must have the upper hand over the behaviour and heritage of a man, whoever he was, being positive that Muhammad was a great and inspired man.

It is true that almost always the *hadīth* is used by al-Ghazālī to comment on the scriptures and not the other way around. Al-Ghazālī cannot be charged with overemphasizing the *sunna* in respect to the revealed scriptures. But it is impossible to imagine a theological-spiritual argument formulated by al-Ghazālī without a continuous reciprocal reference between the Qur'ān and the *hadīths*. Al-Ghazālī insisted innumerable times on the need to imitate the Prophet and it is obvious that he placed great emphasis on Muhammad's *sunna*. However, it is sometimes difficult to strike a balance between the two principal sources of Islamic doctrine.

In his books, al-Ghazālī approaches the Qur'ān broadly in three ways. The first is the traditional approach of a professional 'ālim. The book devoted to the Qur'ān in the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*) is banal in content, so to speak. The Qur'ān is described as being similar to a Christian breviary: the recited text that any good Muslim must know (possibly by heart) and is used liturgically in prayer.

The *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* (*The Jewels of the Qur'ān*) is on the whole a theological book wherein traditional sciences like *hadīth* study, metaphysical speculations (for example, the exegesis of *āyatu'l-kursī* Q. 2: 255, the *Verses of the Throne*, for which see Chapter 3), mystical inspirations are intertwined. I will refer to this book frequently because in my view it represents the most 'sincere' Muslim approach to the Holy Text.

A third, much more sophisticated, approach is that of allegory. The *Mishkāt al-anwār* (*The Niche of Lights*) is perhaps the best example of this reading. Al-Ghazālī exploited all his intellectual resources in order to outline a metaphysics of Light with decisive doctrinal outcomes. Some scholars (such as Montgomery Watt) argued that perhaps the *Mishkāt al-anwār* is not authentic. Or at least not all of it. In my opinion, the first two parts of the

book are surely authentic: their spirit is undoubtedly ‘Ghazalian’. The authenticity of the third part is actually more debatable, chiefly because it seems to contain traces of Isma‘ili esotericism. In any case, the first two sections are important for my purposes.

Methodologically, my working hypothesis is that al-Ghazālī interrogated the Qur’ān in such a way that the scriptures might ‘disclose’ the obviousness and truth of the world, of the text and of God Itself. It is the *‘ilm al-mukāshafa*, that is the science of dévoilement (ἀλήθεια or كشف) which brings to the surface the inner meaning of the text. All the Qur’ān is *ostensio* (‘disclosure’) of meaning. ‘Truth’ is *unveiling* (*kashf*), but also *orientation* of the text (‘orientation’ means ‘producing meaning’) (Campanini 2016). Thus, hermeneutics becomes a duty for every researcher, indeed for every human being (to be discussed in detail in Chapter 3).

Al-Ghazālī as the ‘Muslim intellectual’

Before entering into a detailed discussion of al-Ghazālī’s doctrine it is necessary to consider some issues regarding the historiography of al-Ghazālī and the Qur’ān. Montgomery Watt (1963)’s contention that al-Ghazālī was the prototype of the Muslim intellectual is still valid today, because al-Ghazālī was at the same time a philosopher, theologian, jurist and mystic, and succeeded in bringing together all these facets in order to revive and reform religion, not exclusively for theological, but also for political or at least public, purposes (see Chapter 2).

It is obviously impossible to analyse all the critical literature about al-Ghazālī, which is huge and ever-growing.¹⁴ I will present only a short survey demonstrating that this ever-growing interest in al-Ghazālī’s life and thought testifies more and more to his centrality as the ‘proof of Islam’ (*hujjat al-Islām*) and as *the* ‘Muslim intellectual’.

I will begin with Arendt Wensinck. Wensinck (1940) stressed the neo-Platonic leanings of al-Ghazālī. He spoke of the Platonic ἐπὶ affecting the concept of the semitic God. The semitic God is ‘*un Dieu caché*’ (a concealed God) and, at the same time, ‘*la plus manifeste de toutes les choses*’ (the most manifest of all things), that is *zāhir wa bātin* (Q. 57: 4). God’s knowledge, however, is ‘*amour*’ (love), because al-Ghazālī is saturated with Hellenism and in the Hellenistic religious language γνῶσις θεοῦ has more of a mystical than a rational meaning.

Wensinck’s interpretation is in a sense the philosophical anticipation of what is probably the most long-standing common approach to al-Ghazālī’s thought – the mystic/esoteric. Marie-Louise Siauue in a famous book (Siauue 1986) acknowledged that ‘*l’équivalence entre la Loi, qu’elle soit apprise du Coran ou de l’expérience, et les données des sens*’ (The equivalence between the Law, learned from the Qur’ān or from experience, and which gives meaning) is the very basis of certainty and that ‘*la règle moyenne*’ or *mīzān* (middle way) is the straight path in al-Ghazālī’s view. But in fathoming

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al-Ghazālī's inner spirit, her approach is plainly Christian: al-Ghazālī would have been tormented by '*l'angoisse du choix d'une liberté*' (the anguish of making free choices) which he could satisfy *only* by faith. Siauve read a Muslim thinker through Christian glasses (Blaise Pascal especially) and this implies a distortion if not a betrayal of al-Ghazālī's real intentions. On the other hand, it is well known that Miguel Asín Palacios (1934–1941) claimed to have discovered '*el sentido cristiano*' (Christian meaning) of al-Ghazālī. It is often the case in Western historiography that the best of Islam is recognized as such because it is Western and/or Christian.

These exegetical attitudes were not without adversaries, however. For example, in the 1950s Farid Jabre (1958a) expressed doubt about the sincerity of al-Ghazālī's mystical experience deeming it to be more mental than spiritual, and more constructed than spontaneous. In my opinion, Jabre put too much emphasis on the 'coldness' of al-Ghazālī's feelings, although it is absolutely true that al-Ghazālī never admitted to having experienced the theopathic ecstasy of, say, the great Islamic mystics al-Bistāmī or al-Hallāj. On the contrary, he always firmly rejected the possibility of *ittihād* (unification) between God and the mystic and even more of *hulūl* (inhabitation) of the former in the latter. He was very eager to maintain the ontological heterogeneity and distance between the Creator and the creatures. I will discuss this topic more thoroughly in relation to Ibn 'Arabī in Chapter 3.

Contemporary interpretations of al-Ghazālī's thought are inclined to belittle his mysticism and to stress more and more the importance of philosophy. In this regard, Richard Frank was probably the forerunner,¹⁵ but many others followed in his footsteps, such as Jules Janssens (2001) or Jon McGinnis (2006). However, Frank Griffel's *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* has been the apex of this new interpretative trend.

Griffel (2009) used his discussion of a number of authors and topics to show the connection between theology and philosophy in al-Ghazālī's work, the fruitful intercourse between reason and revelation. As to the Qur'ān, it will be sufficient to say that, in Griffel's opinion, 'according to al-Ghazālī, our understanding of revelation depends on a thorough determination of what can be established demonstratively and what cannot' (2009: 116), for, even though there are Qur'anic passages that are apparently contradicted by demonstrative arguments, 'in al-Ghazālī's perspective reason in no way abrogates or even overrules revelation' (ibid.: 115). It is true that in al-Ghazālī's work there is normally a sort of harmony between philosophy and Scriptural data, but, always in Griffel's opinion, he '[was] convinced, for instance, that rationality cannot possibly convey certain knowledge about what will happen in afterlife' (ibid.). Actually, the same can be said about the rationale of the rule of prayer in the *rak'as* or other ritual obligations:

Al-Ghazālī follows Aristotle and the *falāsifa* (philosophers) in their opinion that reason (*'aql*) is executed most purely and precisely formulating demonstrative arguments ... Unlike the *falāsifa* however al-Ghazālī

assumes that there is a surplus of information on the side of revelation that rationality cannot match. His rule of interpretation responds to this situation and makes room for the epistemological authority of Qur'an and *sunna*.

(Ibid.: 116)

It is, of course, quite a special kind of epistemology as I will try to argue later in this book.

Following this undoubtedly intriguing perspective, recently Kenneth Garden (2014) claimed 'to carry the revisionist wave forward' (p. 8) arguing that (a) al-Ghazālī was consciously a philosopher and never actually claimed to be a *sūfī*, although he was sometimes attracted by Sufism; the only work in which he declares himself a *sūfī* is the *Munqidh min al-dalāl* (*Deliverer from Error*) written towards the end of his life (p. 10); (b) he was a very engaged thinker, connected to elites and committed to practical affairs, very far from a mystic anxious to hide himself from the world (p. 7); (c) the *Mizān al-'amal* (*Scale of Action*) is a good example of al-Ghazālī's commitment and is clearly not an expression of the soul-searching of an anguished man; instead it has been written by a supremely confident man (p. 12); (d) it is odd that *Ihyā' ulūm al-dīn* (*The Revival of Religious Sciences*) has been neglected given that it proves the author's public engagement and is not a work on Sufism (p. 10); and (e) the *Deliverer from Error* was written by al-Ghazālī in order to defend himself in response to dangerous charges brought against him in Nī shāpūr in 1106–1109; it cannot be relied upon as a factual account of the author's spiritual evolution (p. 11), although he considered himself as the 'deliverer from error' required by his troubled epoch (p. 14).

This is not the place for an in-depth criticism of Garden's thesis. My own position on the issue can be said to lie somewhere in the middle (*wasat*), in accordance with what, in my view, we know about al-Ghazālī's psychological attitude. When I wrote a chapter entitled 'al-Ghazālī' for inclusion in the *History of Islamic Philosophy* (1996, edited by Seyyed Nasr and Oliver Leaman), I acknowledged that he was fascinated by philosophy and that philosophy exerted a considerable influence on him, but I retained the traditional outlook that he upheld the view that mysticism and theology were superior to philosophy. It has now been established beyond reasonable doubt that Avicenna was a source of inspiration for al-Ghazālī; that al-Ghazālī did not want to destroy nor properly refute philosophy; instead his concern was to show that it is not able to demonstrate persuasively its propositions, especially those concerning God and the separate realities. Therefore, al-Ghazālī's theology can be considered philosophical. Today I am generally inclined to share this opinion, but I remain perplexed about the move to label al-Ghazālī as *only* (or *eminently*) a mystic whose gaze was mostly turned up to the sky, or *only* (or *eminently*) a philosopher with a political ('worldly' to use Garden's vocabulary) mission to revive the Islamic religion. As I will argue in this book and as I have anticipated above, al-Ghazālī was undoubtedly a philosopher, but in

the sense of St Augustine, rather than in the sense of Averroes. However, he was also a jurist and a spiritual seeker of truth. In my view, the major problem with Garden's interpretation, albeit that it is very interesting, is that it deconstructs the image of al-Ghazālī as *the* Muslim intellectual. I believe, on the contrary, that al-Ghazālī really was such an intellectual. If al-Ghazālī's work can be interpreted as a continuous commentary on the Qur'ān, pursued in different ways at different points in time, as I believe, this idea becomes lost in Garden's analysis. The centrality of the Qur'ān is necessary for any Islamic reformation and al-Ghazālī conceived the *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*) as an in-depth Qur'anic commentary intended to reform Muslim consciousness and religiosity.

In al-Ghazālī's work there is a dialectical link between theology and philosophy, between the 'transmitted sciences' ('*ulūm naqliyya*) and the 'rational sciences' ('*ulūm 'aqliyya*). He was both a Shāfi'ite jurist and a theologian-philosopher. The Senegalese scholar Souleyman Digne (2014) vindicated the autonomy of 'pure' philosophy from theology, but at the same time contended that 'the different heavens of intelligence' lead man to ascend towards the realization of the prophetic spirit and, consequently, to a rendezvous between philosophy and theology (this time with mystical implications too). Although this interpretation does not completely capture al-Ghazālī's position, it is important to understand the distinction between 'transmitted sciences' and 'rational sciences', among which there is philosophy. Al-Ghazālī was not in favour of theology being absorbed into philosophy, nor vice versa of course. His respect or even veneration for the Prophet Muhammad did not imply that ordinary human reason could attain a prophetic level. Perhaps Benyamin Abrahamov (1998) was wrong to declare that a 'pure' rationalism does not exist in Islamic theology. In any case, noteworthy theologians such as Abū'l-Hasan al-Ash'arī did not demonstrate a coherent attitude: while he was worried by the Mu'tazilite theory that man has the capacity to distinguish between good and evil, because good and evil do not have an objective foundation but depend on God's will and decision (and this was al-Ghazālī's opinion too), Al-Ash'arī approved of the use of dialectics and even of logic in discussing God's attributes and other theological issues (and this was also al-Ghazālī's opinion, albeit with the necessary caveats). Therefore, while the independent use of reason (*ijtihād*) was often considered licit in mainstream Sunnism (as was the case for Maturidism), not all the juridical *madhāhib*¹⁶ allowed it.

The problem of rationality in an author like al-Ghazālī acquires some characteristics different from Western (Greek) rationality. First of all, rationality, in the Muslim mind, stems also from the practice of jurisprudence – and al-Ghazālī was an outstanding professor of the Shāfi'ite *madhhab*. It is a rationality grounded not exclusively upon demonstration and logical apodeixis, but also upon analogy. As an Ash'arite theologian and a (partially disguised) philosopher, al-Ghazālī made extensive use of logic and apodeictic demonstrations and arrived (in *Al-Qistās al-mustaqīm* or *The Sound Balance*, for

example) at the point of discovering Aristotle's syllogistic figures in the Qur'ān. But this is the crux: his thirst for religious certainty was appeased first by the meditation on the Holy Book (for which perhaps read as an Aristotelian book), and only second by the study of the *mutakallimūn* and the *falāsifa*.

A brief glimpse at Chapter 2 of *Al-Qistās al-mustaqīm* will reveal this inner epistemological dialectics (al-Ghazālī 2005). To a student of Isma'īlism or Batinism eager to know what sort of balance is necessary in order to attain true knowledge, al-Ghazālī answers that it is the sound balance revealed by God Most High in the Book and is handed down by the tongue of the truthful Prophet. It is completely different from the physical balance by which we weigh barley or gold. Moreover, it is an authoritative teaching that comes not from a remote, unattainable and concealed *imām*, as the Isma'īlis believe, but from the *imām* of the *imāms*, the Prophet Muhammad, whose textbook is the Qur'ān. It is in the Qur'ān then that we have to look for the balance of reasoning. The most precise balance is what the 'friend of God' (*khalīl*), Abraham, used against Nimrod (see Q. 2: 258). Nimrod claimed to be God, then

Abraham said: 'My Lord is It who gives life and makes to die'. It [Nimrod] said: 'I too give life and make to die'. Abraham responded: 'God brings the Sun from the East, so bring you it from the West'. The unbeliever remained bewildered (*idh qāla Ibrāhīm rabbī alladhī yuhyī wa yumīt qāla anā uhyī wa umīt qāla Ibrāhīm fa-inna Allāha ya'tī bi'l-shams min al-mashriq fa't bihā min al-maghrib fa-buhita alladhī kafara*).

Al-Ghazālī discovers in this dialogue the first figure of the Aristotelian syllogism (see *Analytica Priora*, I, 4, 25b ff) which states that (a) it is God who can make the Sun rise; (b) Abraham's God makes the Sun rise; (c) of necessity the true God is Abraham's God and not Nimrod. Al-Ghazālī defines this argument as *burhān*, i.e. an 'apodeictic demonstration'. But does it mean that for al-Ghazālī the Qur'ān is a 'rational book' like Descartes' *Principia philosophiae*? Not at all, of course. The Qur'ān's rationality is deduced from the truthfulness of prophecy. Truthfulness of prophecy gives the Qur'ān its consistency.

Last but not least, considering the similarities between its main theme to that of this book, Martin Wittingham's *Al-Ghazālī and the Qur'ān* is worth discussing. Wittingham (2007) admits plainly that his analysis is historical. His interpretation of al-Ghazālī's Qur'anic commentary activity revolves around four main points: (1) there is often a tenuous connection between al-Ghazālī's theories and practice. Al-Ghazālī was not a systematic thinker, but there is an internal coherence in all his thought; (2) al-Ghazālī did not aim to put forward a general or comprehensive theory of *ta'wīl* (exegesis). I agree with Wittingham here: al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics was an ongoing and plastic activity and he probably did not feel the need to formulate a distinct theory of *ta'wīl* with strict rules of application; (3) cosmology played an important role

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in al-Ghazālī's hermeneutics, even in its more *sūfī* manifestations. I agree that cosmology was a significant issue for al-Ghazālī, but the central focus of his meditation was God and throughout all his activities it remained God, not the universe, nor the natural sciences; (4) al-Ghazālī was a staunch opponent of philosophical hermeneutics, at least insofar as philosophical hermeneutics claim that any interpreter inevitably produces meaning. It is important to stress that his hermeneutical approach was creative and did not merely defer to tradition.

All in all, many exciting roads are open to inquiry and I hope to be able to travel along some of them in this book. Al-Ghazālī's vision of Islam is an arduous balance between differing or even opposing tensions. It is neither fully rational, nor fully spiritual, nor fully juridical, and perhaps this is the true key to disclosing the meanings of a Scripture like the Qur'ān.

Notes

- 1 God is neither male nor female. Consequently, in this volume I will use the neutral pronoun 'It', although I am well aware that this choice will raise many doubts.
- 2 The word in context, *samad*, is one of the most controversial in the Qur'ān and this is demonstrated by the multifarious ways, all of which differ from one another, that translators try to interpret it, as eternal object of prayer and desire, unknowable, etc. I chose 'unfathomable' because it expresses more profoundly the unattainable essence of God.
- 3 All the renderings of the Qur'ān throughout the text are mine. However, I took into account the translations of Arthur Arberry and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (English), Alessandro Bausani and Ida Zilio-Grandi (Italian)
- 4 From the outset I have been impressed by the work of Alessandro Bausani (1957, 1980). He greatly influenced my own 'Islamological' formation.
- 5 Due to the widespread tendency towards a too strict adherence to authority (*taqlīd*), which is harmful for freedom of will and liberty of research.
- 6 *De l'infinito, universo e mondi* (Bruno 1956: 361): 'Non sono fini, termini, margini, muraglia che ne defrodino e suttraggano la infinita copia de le cose. ... Perché dall'infinito sempre nova copia di materia sottonasce. Di maniera che megliormente intese Democrito ed Epicuro che vogliono tutto per infinito rinnovarsi e restituirsi, che chi si sforza di salvare eterna la costanza dell'universo'. My translation from the Italian.
- 7 Jesus Christ and Muhammad represent the last divine prophetic interventions in human history. Since prophecy is over, there remains only the eschatological waiting for the Messiah or Mahdī in the Jewish and Islamic perspective. In Christianity, the same Jesus Christ is the Messiah; he has already come down to Earth, but apparently without having any practical effect on *eschatōn* (the Day of Judgement) nor decisively changing wicked human attitudes.
- 8 A *ḥadīth* is a record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, revered and received as a major source of religious law and moral guidance, second only to the authority of the Qur'ān, the holy book of Islam.
- 9 The expression is a title of a book edited by Gianni Vattimo and Pieraldo Rovatti (1987), wherein the authors tried to demonstrate that avoiding the absoluteness of 'truth' can lead to a freer and less oppressive society.
- 10 And I made fruitful use of this idea in Campanini (2016), in connection with philosophical Qur'anic interpretations.

- 11 Antonio Gramsci was a supporter of this positive reinterpretation of ideology.
- 12 I agree with Martin Heidegger here who, starting with Nietzsche, contended that the modern empire of technology is the extreme outcome of Nihilism.
- 13 Note that *hikma* is a strand of philosophy that is linked with religion and Scripture, while *falsafa* is the philosophy that stems directly from ancient Greek thought.
- 14 The political interpretation of scholars like Mustapha Hogga or Farouk Mitha will be dealt with in the proper place in the next chapters. The 900th anniversary of al-Ghazālī in 2011 produced many publications. I do not believe, though, that genuinely new paths of interpretation have been opened.
- 15 Richard Frank suggested at least two points. First, that al-Ghazālī was not an Ash'arite, or at least that he was less of an Ash'arite than has been believed previously; second, that he was more of a philosopher than was thought earlier, and in this respect that Avicenna was one of his most important mentors (Frank 1992, 1994). The first assumption is wrong in my opinion: al-Ghazālī was an Ash'arite, albeit that he held very original points of view and did not just passively repeat all the tenets of that school. Al-Ghazālī made Ash'arism the very basis of his religious revival, perhaps because he deemed it to be the theological school closest to the principle of *medietas* (*wasat*) or 'middle way', i.e. far from any excess, which inspired all his thought and practice. I believe that Frank's second assumption is generally true, although I have some reservations which I will discuss in this book.
- 16 The four recognized theological-juridical schools of Sunnism.

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